

The interaction of syntax and information structure in Old and Middle English

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Old English and, to a lesser extent, Middle English syntax, raise some difficult questions concerning syntactic optionality. Much of the effort over the past two decades has gone into characterizing the word order options as accurately as possible, and good progress has been made with respect to the mechanics of the analysis. But positional variation for specific elements of has not been seriously tackled (why object pronouns in higher as well as lower positions? Why definite DP-subjects in higher or lower positions? What determines the choice between OV and VO order?), and our understanding of why word order changed so drastically in the transition to Middle English is as yet limited.

In this paper, I take a perspective on early English word order in which a number of syntactic and morphological features of Old English interact with information structure (IS). Two key features are:

- A set of short high adverbs and interjections (including *þa*, *þonne*, *nu*, *na*, *la*, *eac*). The function of these is to separate IS-old from IS-new material. They can reasonably be viewed as particles licensing an extra syntactic position on their left.
- A wider range of referential expressions that can be exploited for IS purposes. Concretely, this concerns the *se* paradigm of demonstrative pronouns, a set of pronouns which, beside marking definiteness in the DP, can be used as an independent pronoun and as a relative pronoun, allowing (gender-marked) specific reference to an extra-clausal antecedent.

The interaction of these and other factors allows a degree of word order flexibility that is exploited for IS purposes on a much larger scale than has been previously assumed. This includes a type of pronoun and definite DP scrambling (accounting for the peculiar distribution of arguments in the “higher” “subject” position that is familiar from the literature (e.g. Cardinaletti and Roberts 1992; Haeberli 2002; van Kemenade 2000); a number of the curious properties of non-subject-initial V2 (most typically non-inversion of pronoun subjects; inversion of DP-subjects); at least a part of the OV/VO contrast. I will present two case studies with quantitative evidence for the significant degree of IS sensitivity attested within the bounds of given syntactic structures. Old English thus seems to be a discourse-configurational language, at least to a larger extent than later stages and no doubt inherited from more ancient times.

The approach taken here may also make it easier to make sense of how drastically the language changed. The change to Middle English, with, for instance massive loss of OV and rise of V-movement, is hard to understand if it is to be understood in terms of syntax alone, even if we assume extensive language contact. If we consider this also in terms of IS sensitivity, the perspective seems a little brighter: IS is typically vulnerable in situations of language contact. The two key features listed above were seriously affected: the IS function of the adverbs listed disappeared; the *se* paradigm of demonstrative pronouns was an early victim of case loss, and appears in Middle English as the definite determiner *the*. Causes for this were perhaps their multifunctionality (definite marker, independent pronoun, relative pronoun), but it is also well-known from the literature on first as well as second language acquisition that gender marking as well as gender reference on the determiner/demonstrative pronoun are vulnerable (i.e. learnt late in L1 and very hard to learn in L2). Granted that the preposing of arguments in Old English was strongly IS sensitive, the large-scale loss of this preposing is easier to make sense of. This in turn changed the input such that it paved the way toward parameter resetting. Another interesting aspect of this account is that it relates the changes to case loss (a connection which in and of itself has proved rather elusive), but indirectly, mediated by the referential properties of an inflectional category that was lost.

This leaves the question how syntax and IS interact. Syntax and IS are here considered separate components; IS makes use of the word order flexibility offered by the syntax, but, once affected by the kinds of morphological change as above, in turn may have impact on the status of syntactic options.